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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR CA/ACS/CI
RIYADH PASS TO DHAHRAN AND JEDDAH
DHAHRAN FOR CAROLINA MELARA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [CASC](#) [CMGT](#) [BA](#)

SUBJECT: LESSONS LEARNED FROM RECENT CHILDREN'S ISSUES CASES

REF: A. MANAMA 153

[1](#)B. STATE 26772

[1](#)C. MANAMA 149

[1](#)1. (SBU) Last week, Emb Manama (with assistance from the Department and CONGEN Dhahran) helped resolve two difficult children's issues (CI) cases involving disputes between Saudi fathers and Amcit mothers, with their dual-national children in between. Both concluded successfully, but one was far more difficult than the other. The lessons that we are drawing from the Al-Shalawi and Al-Balawi cases may be helpful should we and the Department confront similar cases again.

LESSON 1: USE THE SAME PASSPORT TO ENTER AND EXIT BAHRAIN

[1](#)2. (SBU). In the Shalawi case, the mother had the Saudi passports for her and her six children when she went through exit controls at Bahrain International Airport. Using the same passport for entry and exit allowed the immigration officer to verify by computer that she and her children entered Bahrain legally on the Saudi passport. Their departure was unhindered. Their US passports were necessary only to show the airline that they would be able to enter the US upon arrival. Above all, the mother's presence helped make the travel appear entirely routine.

[1](#)3. (SBU) In contrast, the four Al-Balawi children were traveling alone and on new US passports. This raised GOB suspicions. The new passports provided the Bahrainis with no entry record, which raised an immediate flag. Moreover, a senior official in the MOI said that if an immigration officer suspects children traveling are subject to a child custody case, they are to check with their superiors. The Balawis' ran afoul on both counts quickly, pushing the decision to higher levels of the GOB and engaging the MFA. If the children had been able to carry their Saudi passport, they might have been able to leave Bahrain the same night they arrived at the Embassy.

LESSON 2: THE GOB LIVES FOR THE WEEKEND--REALLY

[1](#)4. (SBU) The Al-Balawi children showed up on a Thursday night, the first day of the local weekend. As the Embassy began addressing ever-higher levels of the GOB to get a quick decision--while trying to show as much sensitivity towards local mores as possible by avoiding calls during naptimes and meals--it became more and more apparent that the GOB, especially the Foreign Ministry, was positively hostile to being pressured into making a quick decision on a weekend. One high-level MFA official angrily told the Charge to "stop calling all around town about this," while another told CONOFF that the USG was not helping its case by pushing so hard for a quick decision on a weekend.

LESSON 3: KEEP CI CASES IN THE INTERIOR MINISTRY

[1](#)5. (SBU) For reasons that are still not entirely clear, the MFA appears to have been unhelpful in the case of the Al Balawis. One very knowledgeable GOB source that that at a core Cabinet meeting on February 7, only the MFA argued against letting the Balawi children travel immediately. In contrast, the upper echelons of the Ministry of Interior (MOI) were consistently in favor of letting the children travel. We suspect that the MFA was more sensitive to the Saudi reaction than was the MOI--a sensitivity that led the MFA to commission a "legal study" of the issue. (COMMENT: This "study" appears to have not been completed. END COMMENT). Given this sensitivity, resolving these types of cases through the MOI may be preferable.

LESSON 4: HAVE A CLEAR EXIT STRATEGY

16. (SBU) In the Al Shalawi case, Dhahran CONOFF was in regular communication with both Manama CONOFF and Mrs. Al Shalawi in the weeks prior to the event. This communication allowed both CONOFFs to plan exactly what was needed for the Al Shalawis to depart. In contrast, the Al Balawi children had no clear idea how they expected to leave Bahrain, and neither did their mother. Without knowing more about exactly how, when, or with what documents the children would arrive at the Embassy, Post was not able to lay the groundwork for an easy departure, nor were we able to effectively allay the anxieties of the mother or children about what was going to happen.

LESSON 5: A LITTLE LUCK ALWAYS HELPS

17. (SBU) The willingness of the Saudi father to allow the children to travel to their mother on a "temporary visit" was instrumental in the children receiving GOB permission to depart Bahrain for the US. The father's consent gave the MFA the escape it was hoping for--it could placate the US without angering the Saudis. However, this escape required a senior MFA official to explain (unconvincingly) to the Charge that it was illegal for someone to enter Bahrain on the passport of one nationality and depart using the passport of another nationality, but since the father did not object, it was OK for the children to leave using their US passports.
(COMMENT: A knowledgeable legal source looked at the 1965 Bahraini Immigration Law and said that the law was silent on the issue of whether or not an alien had to enter and leave Bahrain using the same passport. END COMMENT)

18. (SBU) Our pressure certainly had the GOB looking for an escape, but if the father had reacted differently to what his wife told him, or if he believed that the children were still in Bahrain, the Al-Balawi children likely would still be in Bahrain.

LESSON 6: TRUST BUT VERIFY, AND THEN VERIFY AGAIN AND AGAIN

18. (SBU) After receiving assurances from senior levels of the GOB, verified through two different channels, that "everything was taken care of" and that the Al Balawi children would be allowed to depart, CONOFF showed up at the airport with the Al Balawis only to find that the GOB had failed to inform the immigration officers that the children had GOB permission to travel. This time, the immigration officers said that not only was there still no entry record for the US passports, but also a missing persons report on the children filed by the father. We had anticipated this scenario, and RSO was standing by to contact the Deputy Interior Minister, with whom we work closely on many security issues. After several telephone calls and a 30-minute wait, the children were able to depart Bahrain.

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